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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the development of Leonard Bloomfield's theory of linguistics focuses on the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure's "Cours de linguistique generale" on Bloomfield's thinking. The discussion begins with a characterization of Bloomfield's early position with regard to general linguistics, especially as found in his 1914 book entitled "An Introduction to the Study of Language." Second, his interpretation of the "Cours de linguistique generale" is chronicled through his written comments. Finally, the influence of encounters with Saussure's theory of language on Bloomfield's later views is investigated by tracing specific elements of Bloomfieldian writing to the "Cours de linguistique generale." (MSE)

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LEONARD BLOOMFIELD AND THE *COURS DE LINGUISTIQUE GÉNÉRALE*

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0. *Introductory Observations*

Leonard Bloomfield's (1887-1949) theory of language dominated the North American linguistic scene from the time of the first appearance of his book *Language* in 1933 until at least the end of the 1950s. With the publication of *Language* Bloomfield successfully eclipsed the Sapirian approach to language through a much more rigorous, formal approach, which emphasized the autonomous nature of language cutting the traditional ties between linguistics and literature as well as distancing its relationships with other social sciences, notably sociology and anthropology. Those familiar with Chomskyan 'autonomous linguistics' will readily admit that the posture it assumes in regard to language and its analysis has much more in common with Bloomfield's linguistic theory than with Sapir's (quite in contrast to the official 'history' of Transformational-Generative Grammar). An indication of the refusal to recognize the significance of Bloomfield's contribution to linguistics may be seen in the fact that one of the most successful textbooks in North America -- such as the third edition of Fromkin & Rodman's *An Introduction to Language* of 1983 -- does not even make mention of Bloomfield's name in its 385 pages, whereas Sapir is at least mentioned in passing (p.303) in connection with the historical-comparative method, and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is referred to (p.110) as "the nineteenth-century [sic] Swiss linguist [...], who discussed the *arbitrary* union between the sounds (form) and meaning (concept) of the *linguistic sign* ."

I shall not now enter in a discussion of the manner in which the history of 'modern linguistics' in America is currently being presented, but rather deal with the impact that the *Cours de linguistique générale* made on Bloomfield and what it meant for the subsequent development of general linguistic theory in North America.

1.0 *Bloomfield and the 'Cours'*

1.1 In Bloomfield's 1922 (p.142) review of Sapir's *Language* we find his first public reference to Saussure. There Bloomfield raises the question whether Sapir had read the *Cours* while writing *Language*, at the same time suggesting that this question was not really important since, as he noted several years later, "both authors take steps toward a delimitation of linguistics" (Bloomfield 1926:154n.4), and that is, Bloomfield felt, what really mattered.

In a letter to Truman Michelson (1879-1938) of 23 December 1919, Bloomfield indicated he had been alerted to the existence of the *Cours* earlier that year by his former teacher at the University of Göttingen, Jacob Wackernagel (1853-1938),[1] and

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[1] Like the present writer Charles Hockett was surprised that Bloomfield should refer to Wackernagel as his teacher (cf. Hockett 1987:42, where this statement is regarded as 'unique') since Wackernagel is commonly

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that he was "anxious to see it" (Hockett 1987:41). When in 1922 a second edition of the *Cours* was published, Bloomfield acquired a copy reviewing it in the following year. His review makes interesting reading because we can see Bloomfield giving a particular interpretation of Saussure's teachings characteristic of the Ametican's subsequent stance in matters of general linguistic theory.

By the time Bloomfield was reading the *Cours*, he had moved from the University of Illinois to Ohio State University. There Bloomfield was soon greatly influenced by Albert Paul Weiss (1879-1931), whose "Set of Postulates for a Behavioral Psychology" of 1925 was to become the model for his own'Postulates' paper of 1926. We may recall that in his first book on linguistics, *Introduction to the Study of Language*, Bloomfield had subscribed to the mentalist psychology of Leipzig's Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920); see Bloomfield (1914), especially the preface and chap.3, "The Mental Basis of Language".

There were a number of things Bloomfield found important in the *Cours*, whose value, he stated, "lies in its clear and rigorous demonstration of fundamental principles" (Bloomfield 1923:317). (Note should be taken of the fact that in the two pages of the review Bloomfield used expressions such as 'rigorous' and 'rigid' several times.)

1.2 First and foremost, from his reading of the *Cours* Bloomfield concludes that Saussure has proved "that psychology and phonetics do not matter at all and are, in principle, irrelevant to the study of language" (Bloomfield 1923:318). In the *Cours* it is actually stated on page 21 that "l'essentiel de la langue [...] est étranger au caractère phonique du signe linguistique", and there are other observations which suggest that phonetics is not an essential part of the object of linguistics. However, a similar statement is not found concerning psychology, which in Saussure's understanding underlies the nature and mechanisms of language (cf. Saussure [1922:23]: "tout est psychologique dans le langage", etc.). However, it is obvious that Saussure does not build his linguistics on psychology, although we may say that Bloomfield's conclusions are not that far-fetched after all. Yet in his programmatic statement of 1926, "A Set of Postulates for the Science of Language", Bloomfield backtracks on at least part of this interpretation, probably as a result of his adoption of Weiss's vision of psychology. There Bloomfield affirms (p.154):

> [...], the physiologic and acoustic description of acts of speech belongs to other sciences than ours. The existence and interaction of social groups held together by language is granted by psychology and anthropology.

1.3 The next of Bloomfield's comments on the *Cours* in order of importance is that Saussure "distinguishes *sharply* between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' linguistics (1923:318; emphasis added: KK). The concluding sentence of his review makes Bloomfield's particular reading of the text even more pronounced:

> The essential point, [...], is this, that de Saussure has here first mapped out the world in which historical Indo-European grammar (the great achievement of the past century) is merely a single province; he has given us the theoretical basis for a science of human *speech*. (Bloomfield 1923:319; my emphasis: KK)

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associated with the University of Basel which Bloomfield never visited. The explanation of this seeming discrepancy is to be found in the fact that Wackernagel held a professorship at the University of Göttingen from 1902 to 1915, which, according to Schwyzer's obituary of Wackernagel (1966[1938]:54), represented "den Höhepunkt von Wackernagels Lehrtätigkeit", and it is of course there where Bloomfield followed his lectures. (The editor of the 1966 reprint of Schwyzer's obituary did not know what 'Georgia Augusta' stood for, offering the explanation "[Augusta, Georgia]"!)

Here, I believe, is the first intimation of Bloomfield's later decision to treat the synchrony/diachrony distinction as a theoretical underpinning for an approach in which there are in effect two kinds of linguistics, with no meeting points between them. This interpretation of the *Cours* is most pronounced in Bloomfield's book *Language* published ten years later, where it led to a division of these two 'points de vue'. It resulted in chapters 1 to 16 dealing with synchronic matters or, as he called it (p.317), 'descriptive linguistics', the remaining half of the book being exclusively devoted to historical linguistics. As a matter of fact, Bloomfield, unlike Saussure, made no cross-references between those two domains at all, allowing the publisher of his 1933 book to bring out -- as late as 1965 -- a separate publication of chapters 17 to 28 under the title of *Historical Linguistics*.

1.4 Keeping in mind that, as we know, Chomkyan linguistics is entirely 'synchronic', another subject Bloomfield raised in his review of the*Cours* , namely, his interpretation of the Saussurean trichotomy of *language, langue,* and *parole* takes an added significance. He states:

> This rigid system, the subject matter of "descriptive linguistics", as we should say, is *la langue*, language. But *le langage*, human speech, includes something more, for the individuals who make up the community do not succeed in following the system with perfect uniformity. Actual speech-utterance, *la parole*, varies not only as to matters not fixed by the system (e.g., the exact phonetic character of each sound), but also as to the system itself: different speakers at times will violate almost any feature of the system. (Bloomfield 1923:317)

Now, this interpretation sounds pretty close to Saussure's teachings, but if we look at it in the light of the concluding remark cited earlier ("... science of human *speech*"), we will notice a subtle shift: the object of linguistics in final analysis is not the abstract system, Saussure's *langue*, but the much more concrete concept of 'speech', which in effect comprises both *langue* and *parole* (as suggested in the *Cours*, p.112). This shift is made obvious by Bloomfield's subsequent statements concerning the subject matter of linguistics, especially in the "Postulates" of 1926 and the 1933 book. For instance Definition 4 of his 1926 paper (p.155) reads: "The totality of utterances that can be made in a speech-community is the *language* of that speech-community." Here Bloomfield uses 'language', not 'speech', as a term a far cry from Saussure's abstract system underlying speech production; the distinction between *langue* and*langage*, maintained in the 1923 review, is now blurred. The reason for this must be sought in Bloomfield's philosophy of science; it is not terminological, i.e., the lack of a lexical distinction in the English language between these two concepts. Unlike Saussure, who is imbued with a Cartesian spirit, which has a long tradition in French culture, and makes him proceed deductively, Bloomfield clearly followed the Anglo-American tradition. This approach is obviously adopted from William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), whose books served Bloomfield as models when he wrote his 1914 *Introduction to the Study of Language*, and which take an empirical, inductive line of argument.

1.5 Another aspect of Saussure's theory referred to by Bloomfield in his review of the *Cours* -- which has become stock-in-trade in modern textbooks in linguistics, frequently without mention of Saussure (see e.g., Chisholm 1981:4; Fromkin & Rodman 1983:7) -- concerns the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign or, more precisely, the arbitrary and conventional bond holding between *signifié* and *signifiant*. For Bloomfield this means that 'the language of a community' should be understood as "a complex and arbitrary system of social habit" (1923: 318). We find no trace of this concept in his "Postulates" published three years later. However, in his book

Language we read that "the connection of linguistic forms with their meanings is wholly arbitrary" (1933:145), which corresponds with what we find in Saussure (1922:100). In the 1926 paper we find other, related concepts included in his series of definitions, namely, the distinction between 'form' and 'meaning' (p.154) -- which harks back to Saussure's *signifié /signifiant* distinction -- and the same/different distinction in Bloomfield's Definition 5 (p.155), which clearly derives from Saussure's observation that the language mechanism "déroule sur identité et différence" (Saussure 1922:155; cf. also Bloomfield 1933:128). (The 'same'/'different' distinction is also important for the identification of phonemes -- cf. Bloomfield (1933:76-78, 128, and elsewhere -- on which see the next section.)

1.6 There are several other instances where proposals and definitions in Bloomfield's writings can be traced to passages in the *Cours*. At times these connections are not obvious, as in Bloomfield's Definition 1, "An act of speech is an utterance" (1926:154). This definition, I believe, would have to be seen in the light of what Saussure says about the 'syntagme' (cf. Saussure 1922:155), where Saussure in effect reintroduces the concept of 'parole' under a different guise. Another Bloomfieldian concept no doubt influenced by statements found in the *Cours* is that of the phoneme. He characterizes it as 'a distinctive sound' in 1926, and later defines it more forcefully in his book *Language* (cf. Bloomfield 1933:77-80, 141, and 366 with Saussure 1922:83, 164).

However, when talking of 'influences' and whatever we may wish to imply by this, we should not only look at the *Cours* as a source of Bloomfield's linguistic inspiration. We have already noted earlier that Sapir's *Language* was regarded by Bloomfield as a book leading toward the 'newer trend' in linguistics, and we can see him incorporating Sapir's 'sound pattern' idea in his 1926 "Postulates" (cf. Definition 20, "The orders of phonemes which occur are the *sound-patterns* of the language." [Bloomfield 1926:157]). Other sources for Bloomfield were the work of Antoine Meillet (1866-1936), Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929), Bertold Delbrück (1842-1922), Hermann Paul (1846-1921), Otto Jespersen (1860-1943), and various other authors mentioned in his papers and reviews written during the 1920s (cf., e.g., Bloomfield 1926:153n.4, 160, 161; 1927b;), and also in his later writings, including *Language* (1933), where the references are tucked away in the notes and, as a result, less obvious. (One would have to consult the notes and the bibliography carefully, since the index does not cover the back matter.) Indeed, the fact that Saussure's name was listed in the index under 'De Saussure' -- a convention still followed in Hymes & Fought (1981) for instance -- led a number of hasty critics to believe that Bloomfield had ignored Saussure! Bloomfield has also been frequently accused for failing to deal with 'meaning' by people who apparently did not consult *Language* (since his 1933 book in fact contains a chapter 9 entitled "Meaning" as well as a chapter 24 headed "Semantic Change").[2] In other words, it is not something exclusively characteristic of 'modern linguistics' that authors are criticized by people who do not read them.

2.0 *Concluding Remarks*

In the present context, the following passage in a letter, dated 15 January 1945, from Bloomfield to J Milton Cowan is of interest:

> Denunciations are coming thick & fast; I expect to be completely discredited in the end. There is a statement going round that De Saussure is not mentioned in my *Language*

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[2] See Koerner (1970) for a treatment of this aspect of American linguistics from Bloomfield to Chomsky.

> text book (which reflects his *Cours* on every page). Also that it does not deal with *meaning* -- it seems there is no chapter on this topic. (Cowan 1987:29)

Bloomfield does not mention the accuser; he simply added: "I do not intend to give any recognition to falsehood of this kind or to discourses which contain them or are based on them." However, we may assume that one of his detractors was Hugo Spitzer (1884-1960), who carried on polemical exchanges with various linguists of the Bloomfieldian mould during the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., Spitzer 1943). Bloomfield replied to these accusations only by indirection (see Bloomfield 1944). Of course, those who read Bloomfield's *Language* up to page 19 will have seen the explicit reference to Saussure's lectures (although giving a 1915 date of publication, which appears to have been one of the sources for later -- usually North American -- copyists). But less obvious references to the *Cours* can be found in a variety of notes (see Bloomfield 1933:512, 514, 516, 517, etc.; cf. Koerner 1971:449-450n.1, for the exact locations).

Bloomfield's claim that his book *Language* "reflects (Saussure's) *Cours* on every page" seems somewhat hyperbolic for we know, thanks to the recent, careful study by David Rogers, how much Bloomfield was in fact influenced by the grammatical system developed by Panini (Rogers 1987). But in terms of general linguistic theory, the importance of the role that the *Cours* played in Bloomfield's own deliberations can be established with certainty. Given Bloomfield's predisposition (and perhaps also his experience as a field worker), however, it is not surprising that he did not develop Saussure's insights into a concise *theory* of language but rather a more formal *methodology* of linguistic analysis. In this perspective, William Chisholm may have been correct in saying that "Saussure's ideas served as a catalyst to both Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky. But it was speech that Bloomfield proposed to analyze, whereas it was language that captured Chomsky's attention." (Chisholm 1981:13).

If the history of American linguistics is to be understood better, Bloomfield would have to be read much more fully than he has been during the past thirty years. In his writings we would discover many of the ideas that some of us tend to associate with much more recent developments, whether it be Bloomfield's insistence on the importance of syntax, already announced in his review of the *Cours* (Bloomfield 1923:319; cf. 1926:158 and, especially 1933, where we find a 24-page chapter on the subject [pp.184-206], and see also Kenneth L. Pike's acknowledgement in the *LSA Meeting Handbook*, San Francisco, Dec. 1987, p.xxii), his treatment of other linguistic subjects (e.g., morphophonemics), or his philosophy of science. This particular view of linguistics is expressed in his 1929 MLA address (Bloomfield 1930) and in his 1936 paper, "Language or Ideas?", where he joins the logicians of the Vienna Circle and ventures the following observation:

> Linguistics as actually practised employs only such terms as are translatable into the language of physical and biological science; in this linguistics differs from nearly all other discussion of human affairs. Within the next generations mankind will learn that only such terms are usable in any science. (Bloomfield 1936:89).

One may wonder to what extent Bloomfield's prediction has come true.

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SUMMARY

In this paper I will undertake the following: First, to offer a characterization of the early position with regard to general linguistics taken by Leonard Bloomfield, especially as found in his 1914 book, *An Introduction to the Study of Language*; second, to analyze his interpretation of the *Cours*, and third, to show how his encounter with Saussure's theory of language influenced his later views.